A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Chapter 52

Five minutes was all it took for *Invisible Hand*'s droids to evacuate them from *Encounter*. Five minutes, from being thirty seconds from death to being completely safe. Sanya huddled with Alize and Zule on the Separatist flagship's hangar deck. "Don't vent hydroponics!" she'd called, as the droids pushed her into the *Maxillipede* for evacuation. She could only hope they'd listen. *Encounter* was holding together. The destroyer was only a few kilometers from *Invisible Hand*, riddled with blast marks and glowing with residual heat. The battle was moving away, as the other ship drew off the *Tector.* From what she'd heard, the two *Venators* had their hands full enough already. Esera was out there somewhere in *Whirlwind*, and hopefully on her way back.

"You think she'll fly again?" Buna asked, standing with her arms crossed.

"I wouldn't count on it," Durm said. He was flame-singed and utterly exhausted; the Neimoidian was sitting with his back up against the bulkhead of the hangar. "What do you think, Commander?"

"She was an old, worn-out ship when she came to me. Nothing lasts forever," said Voyan. Those three hardly acted like anything was out of the ordinary, besides their physical fatigue. Everyone else had come closer to death than they ever had before. Sanya still had nightmares about the clone commando who'd cornered her in the hyperdrive chamber, over Emberlene, but at least she'd been able to do something there. This time, she'd been utterly powerless, and so had everyone else. Alize had her big arms wrapped around Sanya and Shau Meo both, they huddled together by the bulkhead. Klaud the Trodatome stood very still, but for his antennae twitching. Zule and Oto were shaken, trying to put on their best faces but failing at it. Their guests, Rahab of Tenau and Princess Samé Sellero, were having two very different reactions. Rahab stared at the far bulkhead, sitting with her knees tucked up to her chin, hardly looking alive. The princess paced back and forth, hands shaking, muttering something to herself over and over. *She's about to lose it,* thought Sanya.

Murshida and Purity had been rushed to the medical ward. Sanya wondered what'd happen when they realized Purity wasn't a living being.

A Neimoidian came out onto the hangar, which echoed with the noise of droid fighters returning to their power racks. The officer wore the gray robes of the Trade Federation, and a tall conical hat. A captain, if Sanya knew her Trade Federation customs.

"Who is in command here?" he asked.

"I am Commander Miha Voyan. I was formerly a mechanic on this ship, Captain Dofine." There was no good blood between Voyan and Dofine, Sanya was sure. Both men regarded each other coldly.

"Ah, I remember you. You were a lieutenant last we met," Dofine said. "I suppose your first command hasn't been a *total* disaster. Your ship is mostly in one piece."

One of Voyan's fingers twitched, the only outward sign of the growing anger in him that Sanya sensed. "*Someone's* got to do the fighting, captain, win or lose."

The Neimoidian's lips curled. *Nice, Voyan,* Sanya thought. She appreciated the sentiment, but picking fights with their host wasn't a great idea.

"Your Skakoan passenger is stable, but he'll need to go to Metalorn if you want him to ever recover, it's the nearest planet with a Skakoan surgical suite. However, your illegal biodroid is beyond our expertise. It is yours to fix," said Dofine.

"Xiss, Sanya," Voyan called. "You're with me. We're going to fix Purity."

"Why me?" asked Sanya.

Voyan's eyes darted between her and Zule. *Oh,* Sanya realized. He wanted Force sensitives. But why? "I said, *with me*!" Voyan clapped his hands. "Move, girls!"

But before they left the hangar, Sanya was witness to one more exchange:

"Captain Dofine!" Sellero called as the Neimoidian turned to leave.

"Yes?" he asked, regarding her like one might regard a piece of trash that had suddenly started talking.

"What happened to my ship? Did any of my crew survive?"

"I don't even know who you are."

"Samé Sellero! My ship, *Pride of Sellero*, was at Mandalore. Please, do you know what happened to it?" There was a frenzied energy in Sellero's eyes, a desperate pleading, hoping beyond hope her people weren't all gone.

"Oh, *that* ship." Dofine nodded, looking vaguely apologetic. "Our reconnaissance flights saw what was left of it. It seems the Loyalists were disassembling it, for its computer core of all things. The Republic tends to execute pirates fighting against them, so I shouldn't expect there were any survivors but you. Goodness, it's a day for Humans losing ships, isn't it?"

Samé Sellero's façade finally collapsed, literally. She sank onto her knees, clutching her head as she began to cry.

"That was unnecessary," Alize muttered, watching the Neimoidian go.

"Alize, handle that," Voyan told her, gesturing at Sellero. "Ensign, Sanya, let's go."

Sanya was a little grateful that she got to avoid seeing a grown woman break down. Emotions were powerful things, as someone who'd been trained by Jedi, she knew that better than most. The pain and grief surrounding Sellero in the Force would put her on edge, and hit Zule even worse. Sanya had known some of that crew, however briefly. She'd even liked some of them. Whoever they'd been, they'd been more than a pirate crew to Sellero.

"Do you know why I'm bringing you two?" Voyan asked them, as he led them through *Invisible Hand.*

"Because we can fix Purity," said Zule.

"Because I have no idea how to fix Purity and I need you two to come up with some Jedi magic spell like Captain Komara would in this situation. I don't have a Captain Komara right now, I have a repressed Zeltron mechanic and a gutter-brained Devaronian gardener, both of whom would be of little use without their Jedi magic at this moment!" said Voyan. He openly showed his anger now, fists clenched and jaw set. "But that Potkin witch has ruined my ship and I'll be damned if I'll let her ruin the biodroid put in my care. We are going to fix Purity, there are no other options, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Zule, taken aback.

"Yeah," Sanya said. *Angry Voyan… I think I like him better this way*.

"Whirlwind, Whirlwind*, do you read,* Whirlwind?" asked the voice on comms. The channel opened itself before Esera even hit the button.

"We read you," she said.

"*This is* Oceana, *we are moving to withdraw. Stay to our port and you'll be clear of their tractor beam emitters,*" they said.

"Understood." Esera leaned back in the pilot's seat. Her limbs trembled as the adrenaline of battle dissipated. Her whole body ached, and she wanted nothing more than a shower and a bed. *Encounter* was evacuated and being taken under tow by *Invisible Hand*. *Oceana* had circled around to stay between them and the *Tector*. Somewhere, far off, two *Venators* were aflame and powering up their hyperdrives.

"Big ship," said Esera, looking out at the long gray-and-blue bulk of *Oceana*. The cruiser was something of a cross between a *Recusant, Providence,* and the Republic's high altitude dropship, of all things. *Oceana* was much larger than any other Separatist ship, *Lucrehulks* and *Cataclysm* aside. But the way the cruiser moved… there wasn't much mass in there, not as much as there looked to be.

Whirlwind flew herself to *Invisible Hand*.

Another message came in over comms: "*Komara, see to your people,*" Grievous said. "*We will discuss the details of this operation later.*"

"Understood, Grievous," she told him.

Her people were on the hangar deck, off in a corner near a door. She did a head count as she approached, coming up eight short of the organics, droids, and those somewhere in-between she expected.

"Where is my chief engineer?" she asked them. "And my astromech?"

Lieutenant-Commander Durm, sooty from firefighting no doubt, jumped to his feet and saluted. "Captain! Commander Voyan took Ensign Xiss and Miss Sanya to fix Miss Alpha. R8 remained aboard *Encounter* to guide the droid repair teams. Mister Murshida is stable in the medbay. Your magnaguards are in the repair shop."

"Very good," Esera said. She let herself deflate. "Very good."

Sellero was sitting, crying, between Alize and Shau Meo. The big Zygerrian had an arm around her, and the Felinian boy was holding her hand; both looked and felt very concerned. The feeling coming off Sellero in the Force was so bitterly familiar to Esera that she flinched when it hit her. *Just ignore it,* she thought, *do something productive*.

"Rahab, you wanted to contact your family?" Esera asked.

The Mandalorian girl looked up. "Yes, Lady Komara," she said.

"Come on, I'll take you to the comms room. I'm a captain, they can't say no to me."

Rahab was in the comms room for half an hour or more, Esera lost track of the time. She leaned against the bulkhead, eyes closed, ignoring the murmurs of passing crew. A woman in the remains of a strange uniform who looked like she'd been through an ore crusher didn't fit in with the shiny-clean halls of *Invisible Hand*. Rahab emerged, red-eyed and sniffling.

"How do you do it?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"You just stand there, as calm as can be. It's like nothing even happened."

Esera led her down the passage, back to the hangar. "It gets easier," she said. "Fighting, killing, watching your people die, it all gets easier. Sure, it's terrible at first, but you start to go numb to it after a while."

"That's awful," Rahab said, sniffling again.

"How do you think your uncle kept his head on straight in all that?" Esera asked her. "Because he'd been through it all before. The more distance you can put between yourself and what's happening, the better."

"You're probably right…" A few moments of quiet passed, and Rahab was clearly gathering her nerves for something. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"My uncle, he died like a Mandalorian should. And that's good. That's how we're supposed to go out. Honor and glory and all that. But… I can't make myself be happy about it. I'm not happy, I can't smile. I want… I want to start punching holes in walls! I shouldn't feel… like *this,* because he died a Mandalorian's death, but- but-" Rahab was on the verge of tears again, working herself back up, so Esera cut her off.

"But it hurts, because you loved him. He was family, and now he's gone forever. And it's going to keep hurting."

"Will it stop?" asked Rahab, in a pitifully small voice.

Esera had a sinking feeling in her stomach. "I'll let you know if it ever does."

Back at the hangar, they discovered they'd made the jump to hyperspace and had come out of it. Esera recognized the continents on the planet outside the hangar: Celanon. She'd been here once with her master, shortly before the war, negotiating an agreement to stop the Nalroni from seceding. They'd seceded anyway in the end, after Geonosis showed the galaxy the real face of the Republic. Esera's throat went tight as she saw what space station they were approaching. *Oh no,* she thought. Port Good Fortune was one of the primary orbital transit hubs of Celanon. Master Callo and she had arrived at this very station four years and a few months ago.

A Neimoidian officer Esera thought she recognized from her days aboard this ship approached her. "You're Captain Komara," he said, putting a datapad in front of her face. "Sign this."

"Proof of credit, right?" she asked, putting her name on the electronic document.

"How'd you know?"

"I've been here before, I know how the Nalroni work. Grievous is kicking us off already, is he?"

"We have limited space," the Neimoidian started.

"The hell you do, I had a suite fit for an intergalactic banker all to myself last time I was here," she said. "No, Grievous doesn't intend to stay here long, he's getting the dead weight off before he scampers away again."

The Neimoidian balked.

"Alright, proof of credit signed, let us know when the seals are secured and we'll get out from under your feet. Tell Dofine I'll have his head if anything's happened to my astromech droid on *Encounter*."

"Yes, Captain Komara!" squeaked the officer, before he rushed away.

"Durm, what's the situation?" Esera asked, letting her voice drop and nodding to the others.

"It's that rookie syndrome," Durm said. He gave Rahab a sidelong look, but Esera didn't care if the Mandalorian girl listened in. In fact, she wanted her to, just so Rahab wouldn't fall to pieces like Sellero had.

"The what?"

"You know, when the new guys get all shocked and go near-catatonic after their first fight?"

"Battle fatigue," said Esera. "Right. I suppose you all had a hell of a time while I was away."

"That's one way to put it!" Durm chuckled. "I thought we were dead for sure, at least twice. Buna and I, we've been through it all before. The rest? Never anything like this. It's one thing to be able to fight back, it's another to listen to your ship starting to disintegrate around you."

"I don't think anyone's had a good day," said Rahab.

"Day? Oh, goodness, it's hardly been more than that since this all kicked off…" Durm rubbed his head. "I'm starting to realize how tired I am, Captain."

"Keep yourself together for a little longer, Durm. We're about to go to the worst place we could possibly take a battle-fatigued crew," said Esera.

Esera gathered her present people up, at a distance where she wouldn't have to raise her rapidly weakening voice. Bleary eyes set in exhausted faces locked on her, and Esera got an idea how awful she must have looked… and smelled.

"Listen up. We're heading into Port Good Fortune, it's a Nalroni space station over Celanon. It's going to be loud, it's going to be bright, it's home to some of the savviest merchants and slickest conmen in the sector. Keep your heads down, don't say a word to anyone. I do all the talking, to anyone who gets in our way, do you understand me?"

"Yes, Captain," a chorus of tired voices answered.

"Rahab, put on your helmet, I want you and Buna at my back. Durm, Oto, you take the rear, make sure no one goes after Meo or Sellero. They're small enough to look like easy marks."

The Force had a cruel sense of humor. Esera and her people walked onto Port Good Fortune through the same airlock she and her master had gone through years ago. A mix of nostalgia and grief assailed her spirit. The last thing she wanted to be was a hysterical alien in front of a Nalroni dockmaster.

Good Fortune hit like a hammer. One moment, they were in the plain durasteel tunnel of the airlock, the next they were stepping onto a concourse lit in garish neon colors, where advertisements blared from speakers in competition with cheap pop music. *From fighting for our lives to sleazeballs trying to sell us the latest useless junk…*

The Nalroni were waiting for them outside. A collection of officials had gathered, with police behind them, and a curious crowd beyond. *Great, it's a public affair,* Esera thought, locking her face into a scowl that said *I don't have time for this*. She seized the initiative immediately.

"Who's in charge here?" she barked. "Come on, answer me!"

"I am the dockmaster," said a shaggy-looking Nalroni. His dog-like features showed surprise, his nose twitched and his ears laid back. "What's the problem-"

"Get that crowd away from this airlock," Esera ordered, pointing at the civilians. "We've been battling the Loyalists from Mandalore to Botajef, the last thing I need is a bunch of scammers, thieves, reporters, and other parasites pestering my crew. Get them out of here! Now!"

"Yes, captain, right away!" He bobbed his head, and started giving orders to the station police.

Esera shoved her datapad to the next important-looking Nalroni. "Proof of credit. I can pay all station fees while we're here. Housing, food, water, air, it's all here. If I so much as *smell* a single solicitor within a hundred meters of my people I am going to tear this station apart. Do not try to charge us insurance or bill us additional hidden fees. I know how this dump works, you're not pulling any tricks on me. If you or your scummy station authority get in my way I will have a droid garrison deployed so fast you won't even have time to wipe your hard drives, got it?"

"Yes, yes, understood, captain!" said the Nalroni she'd verbally assaulted. He stamped his approval on the proof of credit with a little code cylinder built into a ring. The police had cleared out the onlookers, and now were warily eyeing up Buna and Rahab, who stood behind her with their arms crossed. At least a part of her shock factor rested in those two, Esera was sure.

The dockmaster returned, and bowed, arm outstretched. "If it pleases my lady captain, follow us. Your lodging has already been arranged."

"Go," said Esera, as curtly as she could manage.

"Look at 'em run!" Buna said under her breath. The Barabel was delighted in seeing the Nalroni get paved over like this. "I enjoyed that, Captain. Ain't never done it better myself."

Esera couldn't find the strength to tell her that she'd just repeated her master almost word-for-word. Master Callo never had a droid garrison to deploy, he'd threatened the station master with a Judicial Forces investigation instead. And much like her, Master Callo's tirade had been pure bluff.

The rest of her crew were dazed by the shifting displays of lights and bombardment of advertisements. Food, clothes, music, computers, droids, even death sticks, this station had it all. The rough look of her group and police escort kept back the merchants, hawkers, pickpockets, and more, at least. They took a lift up a few levels, to a quieter residential area, where her crew was put up in a mostly-vacant, lower-end hotel. It had hot water and beds, and that was all they needed.

Esera wanted nothing more than to pass out, but she kept herself up, ensuring everyone was settled in. Even the pirate princess. She set up a watch system to keep interlopers out of their wing of the hotel, starting with Buna.

"Any of 'em dog-men come at me, I'll bite their ears off," said Buna, cracking her knuckles. "Been many a year since I tasted Nalroni flesh…"

"If you kill any, you'll have to pay blood money," Esera said.

"Little Jedi, 'ol Buna owes fifty-eight thousand credits in blood money here." Buna bared her triangular teeth in a horrific smile. "Ain't never stuck around long enough to pay!"

Esera covered her face in her hands. "Just… do what you need to do until you're relieved."

The hotel wasn't nice by Coruscant upper level standards. But right now, it was the peak of luxury. Esera peeled off her bloody, dirty, sweat-stained clothes, took a twenty-minute shower that filled the washroom with steam, and collapsed into her bed.

Ever since they'd made their approach to the Jedi Temple, Asajj had been having a strange feeling. It was a sensation of *pulling,* as if something in the Force were trying to drag her attention to *someplace.* The closer she got, the stronger it became. Ahsoka Tano pulled every card she had to get them landing clearance, for *Banshee* and Trapper Wolf's thoroughly shot-up Z95. *Tough little ship,* thought Asajj.

A small delegation of Jedi awaited them. Asajj knew all their faces, though she'd only seen them in person at a distance. There was Mace Windu, and Cin Dralig, and-

"Oh no," she groaned.

"What is it?" asked Tano.

"Kenobi…" *Of all the people..!*

"Obi-wan!" The Togruta girl rushed forward to meet the Jedi.

Asajj let her eyes wander. The Senate District was heavily built up, with towers everywhere. She could barely make out the famous Senate dome. One tower in particular, taller than the others, caught her attention. The *pull* was coming from that direction.

"Wow," Trapper Wolf said, breaking her trance. He'd come up on her without her even being aware. *Not optimal,* thought Asajj. She was full of aches and pains from the escape from Mandalore, and wounded too, though the bacta had taken off the worst of the edge.

"Never been here before?" Asajj asked.

"Never," Wolf said. He gaped at the cityscape, awed by the sheer scale of it. "And it's like this? Across the *whole* planet?"

"Everywhere, and it goes for kilometers beneath us too. We're a few thousand meters above actual sea level, whatever that used to mean here. They just kept building and building, up and up, without a thought to who they were burying underneath. Story of the Galaxy, isn't it?"

"It's just not natural." Wolf shook his head. "The Council of Mothers would never let this happen, back home."

"I bet you even believe that," said Asajj.

"Huh?"

Skilled pilot or not, Wolf was still young. At that moment, Kenobi joined them, in the *terribly annoying* way only he could manage:

"Asajj, my darling, you came all the way to Coruscant but won't even say hello?"

"Do you really think I'd drag myself to this place just for your *charming* company, Kenobi?" she asked in turn.

"Of course. My charm is legendary, after all," said Kenobi.

Asajj rolled her eyes. "You'd think that, wouldn't you?"

The insufferable Human made a show of looking disappointed. "If I'm not welcome, I can just go back over there…"

"I didn't say that."

"So you do still care for me!" Kenobi brightened up instantly, while Trapper Wolf looked on, utterly bemused.

Insufferable, thought Asajj. *Absolutely insufferable.*

"Mister Wolf, isn't it?" Kenobi asked the ex-pirate. He didn't wait for an answer. "Why don't you go help Ahsoka, the Council is curious to hear about what happened on Mandalore."

"Good idea, um, master Jedi," said Wolf. He scurried off with purpose.

"He really can't get enough of her," Asajj said.

"Just like you and me, isn't it?" asked Kenobi.

Asajj took a swing at him, but the horrible Jedi neatly avoided her fist. Which she'd been counting on. Decking a Jedi master in their own hangar would have been a bad move. "One of these days, Kenobi, I'm gonna get you."

"What kind of *get* are we talking about here?"

"Keep trying, you'll find out." Truthfully, Asajj wasn't convinced that *getting* Kenobi involved *hostile* violence. She was loathe to admit it, but after months of putting up with women like Bo-Katan Kryze, Ursa Wren, and Ahsoka Tano, Obi-wan Kenobi did have a certain charm to him. Just thinking those words felt like betraying something. "So, why'd you get Wolf to leave?"

"I can't have one-on-one time with my favorite former assassin?" Kenobi asked.

"I know my good looks are irresistible to a scoundrel like you, but I sense an ulterior motive," she said.

Kenobi's smirk melted away, and he turned to look over the cityscape. "You're right." His voice took a different tone entirely. "You've come at a very delicate time. A very *dangerous* time. Something's going on here. Darth Sidious is making a move."

"You think so?" Asajj asked. She joined him in looking out at the city.

"You feel it out there, don't you? Something very powerful in the dark side."

"Yes… it's a *pull*. Coming from… over there." She pointed at the tower her eyes kept getting drawn to.

"Exactly. It arrived a few days ago."

"*Arrived?*"

"Everyone over a certain threshold of Force-sensitivity felt it come down through the atmosphere and end up at that building, a few days ago. It ripped me right out of meditation."

Asajj squinted. "What is that place, anyway?"

"500 Republica, where the Chancellorship apartments are."

"Now that's an *interesting* place for a mysterious dark side energy to land," she said.

"I thought so too. I'm going to tell you something the Jedi Order has kept very close to its chest: we tracked Darth Sidious to the sub-basements of that building, just before Grievous attacked Coruscant. I don't think you need me to do the math for you."

"No, you don't." Darth Sidious, below the Chancellor's tower, with a dark side *thing* so powerful she could feel it from the Jedi Temple? That didn't bode well for *anyone*. Asajj lowered her voice, and glanced over to make sure Wolf was out of earshot before speaking again. "What are you trying to tell me, Kenobi? Are the Jedi about to clean house?"

"I'll leave it to your imagination for now," said Kenobi. For a few moments, Asajj put herself at ease, and listened to nothing but the Force. Sure enough, beneath the strange mix of feelings of rivalry and fondness for her, Kenobi was on edge. This wasn't the kind of edge she'd felt from him when they fought, either against each other or against Maul and his brutish apprentice that one time, back then it'd been a determined edge. This was an anxious edge. What could make the unflappable Obi-wan Kenobi nervous?

"You're definitely up to something," said Asajj. "And you know what? I want in."

Kenobi raised an eyebrow. "*You* want to help the Jedi, with whatever we may or may not be doing?"

"Don't play dumb with me. If I had to choose between the Jedi or Sidious? I'd choose Jedi, every time. You left my master to die, yes, and I'll never forgive that. But Sidious tried to *kill* me, through the only person I trusted-" Asajj realized too late she'd said more than she'd meant to. She looked away, eyes sliding over to 500 Republica's distant silhouette. "Sidious is worse than your Order could ever dream of being. I want my revenge."

"You know what they say about revenge, don't you?"

"It's a dish best served cold?"

"What? Where did you hear that? Never mind, I have a feeling I don't want to know." Obi-wan moved to her side, until he could see her face. "Revenge heals nothing in the end, it only harms."

"Good thing I'm a tough girl, then," said Asajj. She crossed her arms and refused to meet his eyes.

"There's no denying that." Kenobi sighed. "You and Ahsoka should stay here for a while, and this Wolf fellow too. We'll try to get things sorted out with the military. And we're very interested in what Shadday Potkin was doing at Mandalore."

"Information for safety, I can do that," Asajj said. "Just remember, if you're making a move on Sidious, I want in. If not for revenge, then for justice."

"Now *that* is a more worthy cause." Kenobi radiated approval through the Force.

Too damn wholesome, thought Asajj. The worst part was, she wasn't even lying. There was a part of her that still looked up to Dooku, that still craved his approval, that still wanted to learn all he had to teach, and now wanted justice for how Sidious had used him. She stared at the tower on the horizon, and something dark *pulled* at her.

"This is the weirdest thing I've ever seen," Sanya said. It turned out that they hadn't needed the Force to fix Purity, but rather applied logic and tools. Her internals were intuitive to understand and repair.

"You're telling me?" Voyan asked her. He was elbow-deep in Purity's innards, bare arms stuck through a hole in her stomach. The biodroid was missing her clothes from the waist up, Dofine's technicians hadn't been much for modesty. But neither was Voyan going to put them back on for impromptu surgery.

"You've almost got it," Zule said, looking at Purity through a magnetic imaging scanner. "Yeah, a little further up- there!"

Voyan twitched his fingers inside the biodroid. "Okay, that tube is attached."

"That was the last one," said Zule. "Her reactor's all hooked up now."

"What an amazing texture I've discovered," muttered Voyan, pulling his arms out. They were covered in slick orange fluid that smelled like a hospital. He rubbed his fingers together with a squelching noise that made Sanya's stomach twist.

"Gross," she said.

"Now, how do we turn her back on?" asked Zule.

All on her own, Purity's eyes opened, and her head tilted up. "Greetings, Miha Voyan, Zule Xiss, Sanya. Thank you for patching my processing system. I can now operate in full power mode safely again." She offered a pleased smile to them all.

"Glad you're back, Purity," said Voyan. "Sanya's the one who figured sealing up the damaged tubing would do the trick. Thank her."

"I am in your debt, Sanya," Purity said. She pushed herself upright, and then noticed the huge hole in her stomach. Her cheeks turned pink. "Oh no! You saw my private parts!" Purity covered her middle with her hands, heedless of her exposed chest.

Voyan sighed, and turned away. "How else were we going to fix you, Purity?"

"I apologize, Miha Voyan. I am having a strong reaction that I do not fully understand to this situation. Something is directing me to feel ashamed my torso has been seen like this. I think my biochemical powerplant is supposed to be hidden from view."

Sanya and Zule shared a glance, and Voyan sighed again. "*Khan…*" he said, like a curse word.

"It seems I have lost much of my coolant, too," Purity went on. "I can make more, but I will need to ingest certain chemicals-"

"Yeah, sure," said Voyan. He turned back around, and pushed Purity back down onto the table. "Lay still, I need to patch you up."

"Do you know how to patch up a biodroid? Sir?" asked Zule.

"This skin feels realistic to me. I'm assuming if we close it up like an organic wound, it'll heal the same way."

"Correct," Purity said.

While Voyan finished working on her, Sanya and Zule filled Purity in on what she'd missed, and Purity told them what happened under Sundari and at the spaceport, quoting the involved persons precisely in scarily good mimics of their voices. Purity could accurately imitate to such a degree that Sanya picked up on an Esera issue she'd missed until now. *So* that's *what happened to Master Callo,* Sanya realized. The look on Voyan's face and the feeling emanating from him made it obvious he'd just had this same realization too. Zule took it another way:

"For a moment I thought she was talking about me. Dumb girl goes to war, thinks she's a hero, loses someone she cares about, that's a little too familiar," said Zule. "But I guess that's exactly what happened to Rahab too."

"Uh…" Sanya almost corrected her, but Voyan put a hand on her wrist and shook his head. Zule was left oblivious, as was Purity, who continued with her account.

"These Knights of the Republic sound exactly like what I thought the Jedi were," Voyan said, when Shadday Potkin came into the picture.

"Shadday Potkin?" Zule gasped. "I trained under her back at the Temple! She taught the advanced lightsaber techniques class! *She* joined Tarkin's Knights?"

"I never met her," said Sanya.

"Master Potkin was always full of herself, yeah, but she was good," Zule went on. "She knew she was good and wanted us to be better too. You could talk to her for hours about dueling. Didn't matter if you were a little youngling like me or an old master, if you were enthusiastic she'd take time out of her day for you. Maybe she just wanted to show off, but she genuinely tried to help us improve. I really learned a lot with her! It's just… hard to believe someone like that could become like… like this creature you're telling us about."

"Four years of combat can change people," said Voyan. "Sometimes not for the better."

Once Purity was on her feet, they paid Murshida a visit, but he was still unconscious. Then it was off to wherever the crew had been put up on this space station.

While Grievous would have liked to untangle the Mandalore mess immediately, Komara was beyond exhausted. He'd let her sleep. Coherent answers later were better than nonsense now. His attention was turned to the duel between *Oceana*, first ship of her class,and *Daring,* the thirty-ninth *Tector*-class star destroyer. In a perfect scenario, they would have blasted *Daring* to pieces. In reality, the *Tector* was *Oceana*'s match, and there had been two *Venators* they'd had no chance of stopping from escaping. Data from the battle was already on its way to the Republic's analysts.

But data on the *Tector*, a hitherto rarely-seen cruiser, was already on its way to the Confederacy's analysts as well. Thinking men on both sides would likely be disappointed by the lack of decisiveness of this battle, but it'd been exactly what Grievous had expected.

"It's a shame we barely scratched them," said Captain Harsol.

"And they barely scratched you. The ship performed adequately against its intended opponent," Grievous said. "Expecting a lopsided victory would have been foolish, as that was not the mission requirement of this new ship."

"I'm sure it looked adequate, General." Harol stretched his arms, and winced. "We're all still rattled from it."

"Comfort is secondary in combat." Grievous clicked his fingers on the holotable. "You held your own. Just as intended."

"In the short-term, yes. But if we had to run at full power for an entire day…" Harsol scratched his bald head. "You can't sleep when her engines are at full burn. The whole ship felt like she was about to shake apart."

"Why would you be sleeping in battle?"

"In a days-long fight I'd want to rotate in fresh shifts for maximum efficiency, General. Given that *Oceana* is supposed to have an organic crew of two hundred, I'd have enough personnel to do that."

"Besides your *discomfort*," Grievous made sure his tone let Harsol know what he thought of that issue, "what else did you find?"

Harsol's after-action report went on. *Oceana* behaved about as expected. The new ship had many kinks to sort out, some foreseen, some unforeseen. The fixes would be implemented as soon as they were engineered.

Grievous's mind turned to other things after meeting with Harsol. Komara had achieved her objective at Mandalore: the beskar mines were out of the Republic's reach, buried beneath dozens and dozens of meters of molten rock that'd take at least ten months, if not much longer, to cool off enough to permit new tunneling. She'd taken out the town built around the mines, too. Thousands of TaggeCo miners, technicians, foremen, and managers, plus New Mandalorian contractors, all vaporized in an instant by a single salvo of maximum firepower turbolasers. It was the kind of thing Grievous wouldn't think twice about doing. Komara, though…

That girl will be losing sleep over this, he thought. And what about the Tenau clan? Their force had been completely eliminated, but for the chieftain's daughter. On top of that were all the other Mandalorians who'd come to the planet because of Komara's plan. Even the dead pirates might be put on her shoulders. She'd certainly take that burden upon herself. How much of this mess was her fault and how much of it was the scheming of that Shadday Potkin woman remained to be seen.

As if summoned by that thought, Grievous's internal computer flagged a contact *Invisible Contact* picked up coming out of hyperspace. Millions of kilometers away, a *Gozanti* -class freighter appeared, looking completely nondescript. Its transponder stated it was on Confederacy-related business. Grievous knew that the miniscule freighter was in fact packing an electronic warfare suite to put a ship of the line to shame, and carried some of the Confederacy's most competent counter-intelligence agents.

The Office of Safety and Information had arrived at Celanon.

Aboard *Invisible Hand*, in Grievous's tower, Clothar Aclinde, the Carammite spymaster, and his best men were briefed. "You will leave Komara to Mister Aclinde and I," Grievous told them. "She could kill anyone in this room, but for myself. Be respectful, be polite, and she will cooperate. The Mandalorian, Rahab of Tenau, is not to even be threatened. She is the daughter of an allied government's official, and she likely could kill you all as well if provoked. *All* I want from her is her account of what happened. Miss Sanya, the Devaronian, is also someone whose account I want. There is no need to use your usual techniques on her, she's a talker. Finally, there is the pirate, Samé Sellero. I am *very* interested to hear her explain herself. Separate her from the others, we'll be keeping her for… some time."

The officers of safety and information chuckled. Aclinde clasped his hands. "You heard the General," he said. "If I get so much as a whisper any of you have laid a hand on Komara, Rahab, or Sanya, I will put you in the punishment sphere myself, is that understood?"

A chorus of *yes, sir,* answered.

"This is a professional interrogation, for the subjects' benefit as much as ours. Perhaps it might even be called a debriefing. We'll pick apart this Sellero woman much more thoroughly."

Grievous was looking forward to that.

The room was far too quiet, and too warm. Esera blinked, and had a moment of confusion. *Where am I? There's no engines, no light- oh.* Port Good Fortune, the space station over Celanon. When she looked at a clock, she realized she'd been asleep for nearly sixteen hours. And she was starving.

Dressed in a bathrobe that was too loose in the shoulders and too tight around the hips, Esera searched her room for something to eat. *Who was this made for?* she wondered. *Nalroni? Someone who's only seen a Human in holovids?* Either was equally likely. The hotel room was empty of food. She ended up ordering from a Nalroni restaurant that did delivery by droid, a place she and her master had eaten at once. They made a good nerfbone stew.

Then, she had nothing left to do. Her uniform was shredded, bloodied, and stained beyond repair. Her ship was completely out of commission. No new orders had come from Grievous. Esera just lay in the bed, staring at the ceiling, and began to go through what'd happened on Mandalore, again and again. There was too much blood on her hands not to think about it.

"Where did it go wrong?" she asked herself. "Trusting Sellero's pirates? Not slagging the mine the moment Potkin showed up? Not calling in *Whirlwind* when a Knight of the Republic revealed herself?"

If she hadn't trusted Sellero's pirates to provide security, the rival Mandalorian leaders would have never agreed to meet in the first place. Every one of them had been paranoid of betrayal by the others.

Ordering a Base Delta Zero on the mine had always been her option of last resort. She'd never imagined she'd actually have to do it. Giving the termination order for thousands of miners without even trying diplomacy would have been the Grievous solution. No, she'd had to try, she'd had to hope. *They knew what they were getting into. Those workers knew they were operating a strategic facility that was a perfectly valid military target. How many more millions of innocent people go to work every day in the shipyards over Kuat? Or at Minntooine? Every single one of them knows the enemy could come out of nowhere and kill them all. They made their choice.*

Esera knew she was rationalizing. She had to rationalize. What scared her was the existence of a part of her that didn't feel guilty at all for what she'd done. *This is war,* she'd told Rahab. And she'd meant it. One day she might look in a mirror and see only Grievous if this kept up.

And as for Potkin… She'd underestimated the Knight. Murshida had taken down Asajj Ventress, he'd faced Yoda and come away without a scratch. That he'd falter against this unknown ex-Jedi had been unthinkable. Purity was an expected casualty. As fast and strong as she was, Purity was still very new to the Jedi arts. But Murshida? Esera would get him the best cybernetic arm she could buy. It was a shame the depressurization had blown up his real arm. She'd known Jedi who said cybernetics dampened their connection to the Force, permanently. Her right hand twitched, as her thoughts turned to it. Esera never wanted any machine parts, ever.

Esera heard voices in the hall. A male voice, but not Durm's gravelly roughness or Meo's airy Felinian accent. She poked her head out, and there was Voyan, with Purity.

"Oh, good evening, Captain," said Voyan, saluting. Purity saluted too.

"It is good to see you, Captain!" she said, with a bright smile.

Esera was at a loss for words for a moment. She almost didn't register what Purity was holding. "Is that-?"

"I could not find an additional uniform in your quarters, so I took the closest approximation I could," said Purity, holding out one of Maira's old dresses. Stalimurian wool, here on Port Good Fortune. Her sister's hand-me-downs in a place where Master Callo had once walked. Two very different parts of Esera's life, colliding.

"Thank you, Purity," said Esera. She hadn't worn any of her Stalimurian clothes since… Stalimur, she was sure. "Um, how are you?"

"Functioning normally. You look better than last I saw, Captain."

Esera nodded, and turned to Voyan, who looked substantially better rested, and had somehow managed to straighten and clean his uniform. He was the very image of a starship's first officer. "How about you, commander?"

"I'm a little disappointed about how cheaply the police here can be bribed," said Voyan. Esera gave him a stare and crossed her arms. "I *may* have brandished my sidearm to some very aggressive insurance fraudsters."

"I'll have a word with the station authority about this later," she said. "How is *Encounter*?"

"Her condition is catastrophic. She's reached the point where properly fixing her would be more expensive than just building a new ship." Her engineer paused, a wistful look on his face. "*Encounter* has gone above and beyond what her builders ever intended for her. I thought she was done for at the black hole, I thought she was done for over Zeltros, I thought she was done for at Emberlene. This time, though… Well, she's got a few jumps left in her under her own power, if you take her though the smooth and easy hyperlanes. Maybe half a dozen, with a gentle touch at the helm. Tensor fields can be fixed, bulkheads welded, but the stress fractures and heat fatigue in the integral hull? Nothing we can do."

Esera looked at the floor, and hugged her dress to her chest. *Encounter* was a dirty hulk constantly breaking down, but… *Encounter* had become home. "Is that it, then? We're going to throw her to the scrap heap and just get a new ship?"

"No one's saying that. The systems still work, she's still livable. Training on an actual ship is always better than a simulator. Park her in a planetary orbit, let the next generation learn on her controls. Even if she can't fly anywhere."

Voyan's idea added sweetness to the bitter feeling in Esera's heart. *A Jedi knows when to let go,* Master Callo had said once. One of the hardest lessons she'd learned. She took a deep breath. "That's… I'd like that, commander. I'd like that much more than scrapping her."

"And let's get a new ship, this time, Captain. Something that's less of a maintenance headache-"

"Commander Voyan!" Oto called from down the hall. "There's people here asking for the Captain!"

Esera got on her sister's old dress as quickly as she could, with help from Purity. With skirts down to the floor and a neck up to chin, Esera felt appropriately modest. She went out to deal with the newcomers.

A collection of aliens were waiting in the hotel lobby. She saw an Ishi Tib, a Koorivar, and two towering Houk men, their skin marked with swirls of violet and yellow. They were dressed plainly, but the Koorivar pulled out a badge bearing the Confederate hexagon, with the words *Office of Safety and Information* circling around it.

"Salutations, Lady Komara," he said, bowing slightly. "I think you can imagine why we're here. Our master wishes to hear your accounting of the events on Mandalore, and the accounts of some of your compatriots."

Where have I heard of this office before? Esera wondered. It'd been on the news, once, right? She frowned. "Who is your master?"

"General Grievous, of course," said the Ishi Tib. "We ask, with all due politeness and respect, that you accompany us aboard *Invisible Hand.* There are questions that require answers, and we hope you can help us."

"Are you going to explain the muscle?" Esera asked them, giving them her best unamused stare.

"These two fellows deal with the Nalroni," said the Koorivar. "Sometimes the best way to not make a scene is to look like you could make one, you know."

"Alright, whatever, I'll play this game of Grievous's." Esera put her hands on her hips. "Why he couldn't just ask me himself is beyond me."

"We need three others who are here, too." The Ishi Tib pulled out a datapad. "Miss Rahab, Miss Sanya, and one Princess Same-"

"You were at the briefing, that *esk* is not silent." The Koorivar gave his partner a tired look.

"-and one Princess *Samé* Sellero."

Going with Grievous's goons was one thing, putting people under her protection in their hands was another. Esera reached out in the Force, searching for their intentions. They were impatient, beneath their placid masks, they wanted to get their jobs done. They had no ill will to anyone here, they weren't even interested in Esera, or Sanya, or Rahab. Their thoughts dwelt on Sellero. Not one of her people.

"Fine," said Esera. "I'll gather them up."

Minutes later, she had the other three women present. Rahab, of course, was still in her armor, though now it gleamed, freshly polished. The same could not be said of expression. Sellero was looking even worse, still dressed in the same clothes she'd escaped from Mandalore in. She followed Sanya meekly, eyes downcast.

"What's the deal?" Sanya asked.

"Debriefing," said Esera. "Just answer their questions when we're on *Invisible Hand,* they want to know about what went down on Mandalore."

"Who are these guys?" muttered Rahab.

"Grievous's goons," Esera said.

That got a little smirk from one of the Houk.

The Devaronian was the first up for questioning aboard the Office of Safety and Information's *Gozanti,* currently docked to *Invisible Hand* directly to avoid port fees. They put her in a small but suitably furnished room, with lights set exactly to a Devaronian's eyes' comfort level. The chairs were padded, there was a non-allergenic plant in a pot, and a little painting of an old-time Carammite landscape on the wall, though the Devaronian girl would have no way of knowing what it depicted.

"We appreciate you coming to see us," Mazlar the Arcona said, sitting down opposite the table of Sanya. Grievous watched through a one-way mirror, with some of Aclinde and some of his men. It was rare to see an Arcona with their natural green eyes out in the Galaxy, most beyond their home world had gold eyes from their salt addictions. Mazlar had extreme self-discipline, which put him on Grievous's good side instantly. And why Grievous had suggested he handle the interrogation of Komara's harmless companion.

"Uh, sure," said Sanya. The petite Devaronian looked just as unsure and skittish as she had when Grievous set her loose in Raxulon city, months ago.

"I don't want to waste your time, Miss Sanya, so let's get straight to business. Tell me about your role in the recent Mandalorian operation."

Sanya had very little of interest to say about it. She knew all about the machines involved for terraforming, most of which had survived *Daring*'s orbital strike on virtue of being deployed for their duties. There was no information of value there. She *did* however have something interesting to say about Komara:

"I think she's losing it."

"That's a strong statement, Miss Sanya," said Mazlar. "And vague. Could you tell me more about what you mean?"

"I think all this is getting to her, you know?" Sanya said. By now she'd been totally disarmed by Mazlar's friendly but professional approach. Her posture was relaxed, her heart rate down, her arms on the armrests and not crossed over her chest. "She antagonized Sellero into trying to punch her, then pulled a lightsaber on her-" Her eyes widened. "Uh, I might have said too much there, I don't know how much you know about her, but, uh, you don't seem surprised to hear this?"

"I have been fully briefed," Mazlar said. "In fact, I likely know more about her than you do. But I'd like to hear your take. Please, continue."

"Oh, okay. So yeah, Esera pulled a lightsaber on Sellero, and started talking about hearing the dark side's voice, and stuff like that. I've tried to talk to her about it but, well, things between us aren't so great right now. And *then* there's the fact she ordered a Base Delta Zero on the planet. Yeah, it's 'just' one mine she took out, with everyone who was working it and anyone who was nearby, but… it's the principle of the matter, as Voyan would say. Jedi don't do that. Esera *especially* should know better. She defected because of that Aspar guy leveled cities from orbit! Sure, it's a different scale, but… It's the principle of the matter! Indiscriminate bombardment is indiscriminate bombardment, whether it's over a few square kilometers or entire continents." Sanya exhaled, and sank into the seat. "Sorry, it's just… it's rough, seeing someone I used to know act like this. She was a really sweet kid, when I knew her. Some of that's still there. But I think it's slipping away by the month."

"Thank you, Sanya," said Mazlar. "You've been incredibly helpful to us. You can return to your crew now."

"Really? That's it?"

"That's it."

He's good at this, thought Grievous. Without a single threat or implication, Mazlar had gotten information on Komara's state of mind that she herself probably would have never volunteered. The Office loved their toys and horrors, but they were perfectly capable of an effective interrogation just by putting their subjects at ease.

Rahab of Tenau was up next. The Zygerrian, a slim, wispy man named Samuveh, running her debriefing knew a thing or two about Mandalorians. He was straightforward to the point of bluntness, but never rude.

"Thank you for coming on short notice. I need you to tell me exactly what happened down under Sundari, from the moment you arrived to the moment you left."

Rahab shook her head, but went right along. "Yeah, that's what I was expecting. Here we go…"

Her interrogation was longer, and Grievous listened closely to her descriptions of the GX1 battle droids they'd fought. It seemed they were unhackable, except from the remote main control computer, which clearly had been hacked. They'd fought their way out of the tunnels, losing Asajj Ventress and Ahsoka Tano, plus a few pirates along the way. Unfortunately they'd been lost of their own accord, choosing another path, and not lost because they were killed. *A shame,* Grievous thought. Then came Komara's encounter with Shadday Potkin. The girl had stood her ground and fought… and was beaten. Disappointing, but not surprising. Grievous's file on Potkin was sparse, but she was a lightsaber combat expert, someone even he had to approach carefully if they ever met.

"How would you have described Komara's attitude, during these events?" Samuveh asked, once Rahab had told of their escape.

Both Grievous and the Mandalorian girl were surprised. The question stirred him from his thoughts. *Why is he asking about her? Rahab doesn't even know her!*

"Uh…" Rahab looked around the room, before taking on a gloomier disposition. "Well, in one word? Callous. She didn't try to treat my wounded uncle and didn't hesitate to leave him behind. She's very fatalistic. I think that's the right word."

"I believe it is," said Samuveh. "Lady Komara is an important asset; we are interested in her continued good performance."

Rahab was dismissed shortly after, and soon Grievous understood why Aclinde's men were interested in Komara's behavior. He did not watch her debriefing in secret, and Aclinde did not let his interrogators run this one, he took it on himself. They'd put their subject in a plain room, with a metal desk and metal seats. Komara was looking displeased. She was in better condition than Grievous had last seen her, but not by much. The physical exhaustion was gone; the mental was not, not by a long shot.

"I've been sitting here for over an hour," she said. "It's about time you showed up, Grievous. And I see you brought *that* man."

"Things did not go as intended, at Mandalore," Grievous told her. "We want to know why."

"What are you going to do? Nerve-staple me?" Esera crossed her arms, and glared at the Carammite.

"I hope it'd never come to that," Aclinde said. "You operate under the General's jurisdiction, besides. No, Captain Komara, we just want to know what happened."

They started from the top, with Komara's arrival in system, and she took them right through her rescue by *Oceana*. The full story took over two hours. Grievous noted she'd given them a much sparser description of the Sellero incident than Sanya had.

"You got what you wanted?" Esera asked, accepting the glass of water from Aclinde without so much as a glance toward him.

"Not quite," said Aclinde. Grievous looked at him.

"What else is left, spymaster?" he asked.

"We've already spoken to Miss Sanya and Miss Rahab, Captain Komara. What I heard from them raises my doubts about your condition. The good General cannot see the problem I see. He isn't Human, after all. He doesn't share our innate understanding of each other."

"I don't share *anything* with you," said Komara.

She hasn't lost her snark, thought Grievous. That was a good sign, right? Aclinde's implications had his brain in a whir, but his assisting computers were not programmed to identify psychological issues. Yes, Komara was exhausted inside, but a few days of rest would set her right.

"To put it bluntly: I am concerned for your mental health," Aclinde said. "You've been at war since you were fourteen years old, right?"

"Yes."

"What's the longest you've been out of combat?"

"Probably the time between Zeltros and Emberlene," she said. "Three months, maybe less."

"As I thought. Tell me more about what happened between Sellero and you."

"She tried to attack me, I defended myself."

"And this… voice of the *dark side?*"

Komara was surprised by those words, but quickly narrowed her eyes. "The dark side is *real*. It has a voice."

"I don't doubt it. You're not the first Jedi I've met." Aclinde looked over his datapad. "According to your kind, the dark side of the Force is a corruptive and seductive influence, empowered by fear, anger, hate, and suffering. It acts like something of a drug, if I'm understanding this right. It can be very hard to let go of once you've touched it. And you have touched it before, haven't you?"

"I have," said Komara. She was sitting up straighter, and was more alert now. The anger in her was subsiding, replaced by wariness.

Good, take this man seriously, Komara, thought Grievous. *You're not dealing with an ignorant fool. Don't play around!* He could stop this any time he wanted, but Aclinde's line of questioning had piqued his interest. As well as his concern, too.

"You've been in contact with this addictive and damaging supernatural essence," said Aclinde. "Some soldiers who have been on the front lines too long turn to drugs. Alcohol, death sticks, narcotics, spice, you name it. Your vice is the dark side."

"It is not!" Komara snapped. "I touched it *once*. It was the second worst mistake I've ever made. Yes, I can still hear it, sometimes. Yes, it still calls to me, sometimes. But I do *not* listen to it!"

"Out of curiosity, what was your first worst mistake?"

"That's none of your business!"

Grievous saw her heart rate spike, and her bad hand spasm. That worst mistake of hers was a sore point. An extremely sore point. A quick review of his memories revealed the most probable answer. *Still upset over her master's death,* he thought. His file on Olor Callo was sparse, just a report of his activities and his wounding in combat, followed by a death notice a few days later. He considered terminating this interrogation; he'd gotten the full story on Mandalore. But Aclinde might have been onto something. Komara had never told him she still felt the dark side's pull. She'd tried to gloss over her run-in with the pirate. What else was she hiding?

"Your comrades had questioned your conduct in this operation, you know," Aclinde went on. "Miss Sanya was very upset by what you've done. Base Delta Zero isn't an order given lightly. I understand why you did it, I would have done the same, and probably far sooner. I commend you on your patience. But Miss Sanya was adamant about how out of your character it was."

"What else was I supposed to do?" asked Komara. "And who the hell is she to judge me? Do you think that little Devaronian has ever been through a *fraction* of what I have? Sure, she cleaned up the bodies left on the battlefield, but it was *me* making them! I know better than anyone what could have happened if the Republic kept that mine operating. Potkin outplayed me, so I blew up the mine. If she wouldn't accept a neutral, united Mandalore, then I wasn't going to let her get that beskar. What are a few thousand miners, who *knew* the risks of working at a military target, against what Tarkin might have done with that mine?"

"*Could have, might have*, these are all hypotheticals, Captain Komara," said Aclinde. "Your friend is focusing on the actual. You killed a lot of people to achieve your objective. Miss Sanya doesn't think you're in your right mind."

"Sanya doesn't even know who I am!" Komara pounded her one functional fist on the table. "She's a liar, she's a fake, she doesn't know a damn thing!"

This girl had always had a temper, but she'd never been this volatile before. Grievous would have frowned, if he had a mouth. *Something is definitely wrong here,* he thought. He'd seen her this upset in the past, but for far more rational reasons. This was unusual.

"Miss Rahab thought you were callous, how you treated the late Mister Baruch."

"Baruch was a dead man walking," said Komara. "There was *nothing* any of us could have done for him. I've left better men than him to die. Because it was either leave, or die with him. She can call me callous all she wants, I made the right choice."

"You did," said Grievous. "I left many wounded to serve as rear guard. They became martyrs, they became immortal."

Aclinde gave him that odd look he always gave when Grievous slipped into Kaleesh warlord mode. The Human just didn't understand. "As you say, General."

"As I say. Where is this line of questioning going, Aclinde?"

"I'm serving you proof of a theory I've been developing," said Aclinde. "I know you've placed great trust in Captain Komara, and it's often been rewarded, but you have pushed her too far, too hard. Humans have their limits, and she's past hers."

"Am I?" Komara was not content to let others speak about her like she wasn't there. "I'm still here. I'm still in the fight. Sanya can whine about the details all she wants, I *finished* the mission."

Aclinde raised his hands. "I don't deny it. But let's look at your record. Zygerria was a coup, quite literally. You got lucky, but you pulled it off. The Corporate- excuse me, Stark Sector, was another stroke of luck. Flying down a black hole? I wouldn't have tried it. Your encounter with Mister Harak Murshida and Ardabur Aspar? Pure luck. Getting Zeltros out of the war? They'd decided to fully support the Republic, until Tarkin made a mess of things, and then you played right into the Zeltrons' hands. Emberlene and Zoma V went exactly as you planned, I admit, though on the latter it seems you had a run-in with heat stroke."

"*What?*" asked Grievous, whirling around to face Aclinde.

"I learned this recently, General, my agent at Siskeen returned from Zoma a few days ago."

The twin revelations stunned Grievous. The first was that Komara had been a heat casualty. Summers on Kalee were brutal, and one had to be careful. Those who succumbed to heat almost always ended up succumbing to it again. He'd had to send those warriors far up north to the marshlands, where they would still be reliable. Komara was no longer reliable in hot climates. She'd never told him. The second was that Aclinde had men following up on Komara. Curious. Very curious.

"You neglected to mention this in your reports," said Grievous, leaning over until he shadowed her.

"It… was not relevant," Komara said. She wouldn't look him in the eyes.

"Of course it's relevant, fool girl!" he growled. "You could have died if I'd sent you to another such planet!"

"I could die at any planet you send me to."

"Not like this. You have been permanently weakened by this, Komara. You will always be at risk in the heat now. If you are going to die, I would have you die on the field of battle, not uselessly from some sickness you could have prevented!"

Komara looked like she'd been punched, hard. *Good,* he thought. This was something he didn't want her to forget. The blood had drained from her face.

Without a response from her, Aclinde cleared his throat. "And that brings me to the Mandalore operation. Well-planned, well-executed, but for the glaring weak spot: the pirates. On Caramm, we make it a point never to have dealings with pirates unless we can kill them at a moment's notice. You never even stepped foot on their ship. *Someone* on their crew betrayed you, and you never saw it coming. I hope to find out who, soon. Your opponent exploited this weak spot, throwing weeks of effort and millions of credits you invested out the window, leaving you with only the option you could have used from the start: blowing up the mine."

Aclinde sat back, sweeping his discerning eyes over the girl's ashen face. "I'm starting to think your reputation may be a bit exaggerated, Captain Komara. You've delivered us many victories, but how much of that was you, and how much was circumstance?"

"Do you doubt her competence, Aclinde?" Grievous asked, rounding on him again. "She has made mistakes, but she has also fought admirably from the moment she joined me."

The Carammite stood up, and pushed his chair in, then turned to face Grievous, a show of courage few ever managed. "General, you are approaching this with Kaleesh psychology. Humans are *not* Kaleesh. Our brains are not wired the same. This young woman has spent her formative years as a child soldier. The psychological consequences of this in Humans are severe. Depression, anxiety, emotional inflexibility, inferiority complexes, post-traumatic stress disorder, abusive behavior, these are all documented in young Humans who have been through what she's been through. Her record attests that she is no different."

"Are you sure?" Grievous asked.

"I'm still here," Komara said, sounding shaken and looking ill. "Don't ignore me."

"Have I ever been wrong, General?" asked Aclinde.

The man was right, almost certainly. Clothar Aclinde was very good at what he did, he'd made a life on it. He could pick people apart and lay bare all their secrets. Why shouldn't he be able to do the same to a former Jedi? Everything he said about Komara lined up with what he'd noticed about her, over the months they'd worked together. The healthiest thing for this girl would have been to get her far away from this war.

Only, Grievous couldn't do that. *I know who you are, Komara. I know why the gods sent you to me, and why they put you on this path.* The gods were beyond mortal morality. Why should Komara's path be any less difficult than his, on account of her species and youth? The decision had been made, her fate had been laid out, and to what end, only the divine knew. It was not Grievous's place to interfere. He was on a mission, and Komara was vital to that mission. The Sith plan had to be dismantled. Komara was key to this, somehow. *I know who you are, and why you returned to me.* One life of suffering just wasn't enough for this poor child, was it? Would her end in this life be any better than it was in her last?

"The gods are cruel to use her so," he muttered. "I will do what I can for her, Aclinde. But her work is far from done."

For a moment, Aclinde's eyes flashed with fire, before he looked over at the girl. What was left on his face was resigned disappointment. "I know better than to argue with you, General. Captain Komara, you may return to your people."

Komara looked at Grievous. He nodded towards the door, and she hurried out.

"Curious costume," Aclinde remarked, once she was gone.

"The fashion of her home planet," Grievous said. "Stalimur is a cold place. Perhaps I should send her there."

Aclinde nodded. "Yes, that's far enough away, General. Now, let's go see how our pirate princess is doing!"

The pirate princess was not having a good time. They'd shoved her into a dark room, and put a blinding spotlight in front of her face. She squinted in the bright light, unable to see anything beyond. Her arms and legs were bound to the chair she sat in.

"Will someone tell me what the hell is going on?" she asked, putting up a desperate bravado that Grievous could tell was quickly fraying. "You've kept me in here for hours!"

Aclinde and Grievous entered, and the other OSI agents moved behind Sellero, out of sight, but not mind. Grievous stood back, and let Aclinde take center stage once more.

"Samé Sellero, self-declared Princess of Penhalla, daughter of King Savun of Naboo and patriarch of the House of Sellero, a cadet branch of the House of Parnelli." Aclinde recited her pedigree, probably more to see how she reacted than anything else.

"At least you know who you're dealing with," Sellero spat.

"Yes, who are we dealing with? Let's find out." The Carammite sat down, and placed a datapad on the table. The light hung over his head, shining on the pirate. "King Savun, the scion of a once-mighty family that had fallen on hard times. Elected king of the Naboo for his shrewd political senses and keen economic knowledge. He negotiated some hard deals with the Trade Federation, I understand. Unfortunately, he was deposed."

"The nobles betrayed him. They chose to side with the Gungans over him!" Sellero said.

"Is that what he told you?" Aclinde chuckled. "You're more naïve than I thought. No, dear Princess, your father was deposed because of his proclivities for underage girls. You see, he was having an affair with a servant girl named Kalé. She captured his heart, and crafty King Savun arranged for his lawful wife to die in such a way that he could blame it on the Gungans and do something about them. Killing two birds with one stone, to borrow a Corellian phrase. Clever man! Unfortunately for him, his plot was discovered, and he fled the planet with his mistress, and much of the Royal treasury. Your law enforcement covered it up as to not stain the reputation of the monarchy, they spun it as a hasty abdication after his advisers had refused to vote for a war against the Gungans. So much for that Naboo high-mindedness. Some few years later, you were born."

"What a bunch of filthy lies," said Sellero. But her heartbeat was up, she was sweating. Grievous saw the woman's transformation from angry to disturbed, just as he'd seen it in Komara. His spymaster was on a roll today.

"The truth can be disappointing. Your father was not an unjustly persecuted patriot, Princess. He was a ruthless murderer and a devious schemer. I think I would have liked him."

Grievous would have sniffed sharply in humor, if he'd had a nose.

"That can't be true," Sellero said. "Why else would his armsmen stay loyal to him, forty years after his fall from power? Crede and- and- Lelin-" she stumbled over those names, and looked away from the light, "were good and loyal men. They wouldn't serve someone like that!"

"Were they good men?" Aclinde looked to his datapad. Though Grievous couldn't see his face from this angle, he imagined he had an eyebrow raised. "According to my research, Lelin was the assassin who murdered Savun's wife, an unarmed woman half his size, and Crede arranged Savun and Kalé's escape from the planet with millions of credits that weren't theirs. They were *loyal* men, to a fault. Hardly good, though."

"They were! They raised me!"

"Yes, because caring for children is *such* a sign of inner goodness." The Carammite's eye-roll was nearly audible. "These paragons of virtue then purchased a number of warships, first among them the *Pride of Sellero,* and began a relentless pirate campaign against their very home planet!"

"*No*, my father took his people to Penhalla," said Sellero. "The Hutts then destroyed our colony, and we lived solely in the Fleet after that."

"My dear Princess, please do the math. Your father was deposed forty-one years ago. You were born thirty-four years ago. What do you think he was doing, between then and your birth?"

Sellero was silent. Her brain was putting the pieces together, but she didn't like them one bit.

"So, we have a murderous king turned pirate, his amoral henchmen, and a princess who took up the mantle when he died. In more ways than one." Aclinde flipped his datapad around. "You've got quite an appetite for young men, don't you, Princess? You're lucky there's no age of consent in Hutt Space… or any court system out there, for that matter."

Sellero blanched, and slumped down in her seat. "If you're trying to blackmail me-"

"Oh, this isn't blackmail, dear Princess, this is a direct threat. I do admit, I too would have liked the attention of an older woman when I was sixteen." Some of the agents behind Sellero snickered. "But I was never a mere hired crewman aboard a pirate warship. Their lives were in your hands, and you both knew it. I wonder, do you think you'd enjoy being on the other side of that power dynamic?" asked Aclinde.

"What do you want?" Sellero looked very small at that moment, in that big tattered jacket of hers.

I don't like where this is going, Grievous thought. He didn't understand the Human obsession with numbers, Kaleesh of both sexes had the rites of adulthood when their elders judged them prepared, and that was enough. Regardless of what Sellero had or hadn't done, though, Aclinde's threat jogged a disgusted impulse deep inside him.

"Cooperation," Grievous said, as he stepped into the light. Aclinde gave him a displeased look, and Grievous gave it straight back. He would just have to suffer his fun being interrupted.

Sellero tried to jump, but her restraints held her tight. Her eyes went wide and her face went pale. "Grievous!?" she squeaked.

"The *droid general,* you called me, wasn't that the phrase?" asked Grievous. He loomed over her, his mask silhouetted by the bright light. "You ought to consider your words, Princess."

"You're the *droids'* general," Sellero said, voice still an octave higher than usual. "You lead the droids! That's what I meant!"

"Good. We all misspeak now and then. Onto more serious business… You have cost me several valuable assets this week, Princess," said Grievous, running his claws across her cheek. What was more, she'd pushed Komara to the very edge. And *that* was what really bothered him.

"I- I- I-" the pirate began to stammer.

"I did not ask you to speak, Sellero," Grievous growled. "We are going to ask the questions. You are going to answer. Is that clear?"

Sellero could only nod.

"Good. Let's begin."

The pirate princess held nothing back. Unfortunately, her story corroborated what they'd heard from Rahab and Komara: there'd been a traitor among the Sellero Fleet, but it hadn't been the Princess herself. Grievous walked away from that interrogation with a strange sense of disappointment. *At least we know now,* he thought. With that out of the way, it was time to give Komara the lecture she had coming.

'Useless' was a word that had been on Esera's mind a lot, lately. *If you are going to die, I would have you die on the field of battle, not uselessly from some sickness you could have prevented!* That moment was burned into her memory. Had he known? Or was he just lucky? Somehow, Grievous had managed to choose the words that hurt her most.

Not that Esera was innocent. A lie by omission was still a lie. And victims of heat stroke *did* seem to succumb to it again more easily. The science wasn't entirely clear to her, but he must have seen it many times in his past life.

Then there was what the horrible man had said. Clothar Aclinde had echoed Grievous himself, though he probably didn't know it. When they first met, in that service hall above the Separatist congress chamber, Grievous had called her a child soldier. At seventeen, Esera had thought herself an adult. At eighteen, she definitely thought so. But she'd started this war at fourteen… Was that what she was? She wasn't depressed or anxious, was she? She wasn't emotionally inflexible or post-whatever stressed, was she?

I've got a lot of things on my shoulders, Esera thought. *Sith plots, a monstrous cyborg, a crew who needs me… I've got a right to be stressed! This is hard work!*

But as Master Dooku's holocron had said, looking inward with honesty was the most important skill a Jedi could have. Esera didn't like looking inward. Sleeping was hard enough already, she didn't need to go digging through all *that* in her waking hours too.

Her communicator rang a warning: the warning that sounded when Grievous was being courteous but wouldn't take no for an answer. Esera took a breath, and sat on her hotel room's bed. The cyborg's life-size hologram appeared, glowing blue in the dark.

Grievous stood hunched over, hands behind his back. He tilted his head as he peered down. "*I am disappointed,*" he said. "*You withheld vital information from me.*"

"Yeah, well, I didn't feel like being humiliated anymore that month," said Esera.

"*The gods of nature do not care how strong or wise you are,*" Grievous said. "*The sun is the sun. It can kill you.*"

"It wasn't even the sun, it was the humidity."

Grievous did his dismissive hand-wave. "*That is beside the point. I have read up on your genetic heritage, Komara. You have been to your home planet; you must know the conditions your people live in. You knew you were at-risk and stayed far too long on the surface of Zoma. Now I cannot safely send you to such climates again. This is an inconvenient issue.*"

"I'm glad I'm just an inconvenience."

"*You are not listening. I* need *you, Komara. The gods have sent you for a reason, but they cannot hold your hand! When you stray from their path, they cannot right you again!*"

"What are you even talking about?" asked Esera. "What gods?"

The cyborg blinked, and his hologram backed off a step, glancing around as if afraid he'd been overheard. The Kaleesh warlord half of Grievous was a far more self-aware character than the Separatist maniac. "*This is not a good time to speak of them.*"

Whatever, Esera thought. "Look, Grievous, I get it. I messed up. I messed up a lot. I don't need you to tell me. I *know*. Both Zoma and Mandalore. Don't think I'm an arrogant idiot like Sellero. I'm sitting here kicking myself harder than anyone else."

"*That is exactly the problem,*" Grievous said. "*I have also read up on Human psychology this evening. I fear Aclinde is right.*"

"I'm pretty sure he's not," said Esera.

"*He is. I am giving you a new assignment. You will be overseeing the flash-training program at Minntooine, for the crews of our new cruisers being built there. Vice Admiral Cartroll is doing the same at Sluis Van, he will fill you in on the details.*"

Typical Grievous, changing the subject as he pleased. But Esera nodded along.

"I'm not much of a teacher, but I'll try," she said.

"*Leave the teaching to your veterans.*"

"I've seen more combat than any of them, Grievous."

"*Starship operations are not infantry tactics.*"

"Fair. So if I'm not actually teaching, what am I doing?"

"*Resting. Sort yourself out as best you can. I am giving you and your crew two weeks of leave time to spend as you see fit. After that, your assignment will be ready, and you'll have two months before I need you again.* Oceana *will be departing for Minntooine in three days, you and your personnel will board her and disembark upon arrival.*"

"What about my ship? *Encounter*'s still good for a few more jumps, Commander Voyan said."

"*That is your prerogative as captain. But I want* you *on* Oceana *for the transit.*" Grievous gave her a glare that brooked no objections.

"Alright," said Esera. Off to Minntooine it was. Last time she'd been there, she'd been helping get *Encounter* put back together again. Three battles later, it looked like it'd be *Encounter*'s final resting place. "What will I be doing after, in two months?"

"*It's a surprise,*" Grievous said. The Separatist maniac was back in force again; he rubbed his hands together and cackled. "*I will be in contact when I need you again.*"

With that, he was gone. Probably for two months. Two months of no Grievous. There were worse things. Esera hoped he wouldn't get into any trouble without her telling him off, but… the war was quiet, right now. He had the right idea, now was the best time to be training new personnel. But still… Esera hoped she'd have a lot to do on this new mission. When she didn't have something to occupy her mind, she thought herself in circles.

She tried to get some sleep, but instead stared at the ceiling until the station's morning cycle began.

Author's notes and two long responses: I've had this chapter done for a while now but sat on it so I could post it in June as promised. I don't have much to say about this chapter itself, other than that we've entered the awkward transition area between two major parts of the story. I've repeatedly warned you guys about the pace accelerating, and from here on out, it actually will. Everything I've heard about the Kenobi show just confirms my belief Star Wars is dead (murdered by the Rat) and I'm eager to get this fic finished so I can be done with Star Wars forever. Every franchise I like gets destroyed by corporate parasites-in-suits so I might as well start making my own. I'm not *tired* of this story, I just want to finish it and I'm feeling that fire more than ever lately.

I'm going to single out two reviews for responses today. They both have uncommon critiques of how I've written this story and both touch on similar issues. Usually I reply to critiques privately but these warrant a public response as they concern the nature of ASD's narrative and its foundations, as well as its future trajectory.

To Valued Reviewer FractiousDay. Thank you for providing critique. I hope I don't come off as defensive here, there are some things I agree with you on and intend to change, some things I agree with you on but can't change, and some things I disagree on to due differences in our interpretations of the universe George Lucas has left us. If anyone needs context, find his review of chapter 51. There are four points I will address:

Firstly, you say more of the war should be shown. I agree. ASD's original goal was to put the "wars" back in "Clone Wars," but in 2019 I realized there was a much more compelling (to me) and human story I could tell within the Clone Wars. Battles that don't further this narrative won't get center stage treatment. I apologize for the false advertising I made back in 2016. You could try out ZakoBattleDroid's OOM-9's Revenge if you're an action junkie, there are no pesky things like characters talking about their feelings or musing on morality there.

Secondly, you said most war crimes seen so far have been due to mustache twirling villainy. I've tried not to write all the antagonists that way (besides Chancellor Tarkin and Clothar Aclinde, who are just nasty people all around) but clearly I'm not managing it if you had to say something. I'll do better to illuminate antagonist goals and reasonings in the future. And no, the bit about Potkin's past was not added in response to this, that was there before I ever read this review.

Thirdly (and here's where my obligatory Filoni griping comes in), your impression that the war didn't seem that large in canon seems odd to me, because virtually every single piece of Star Wars media before Filoni Wars aired portrayed it as massive, from the books , to the video games, to Episode III itself. It's Filoni Wars that contradicts the entire rest of the franchise before 2008, when Filoni annihilated the continuity established by the Clone Wars multimedia project. I don't believe there were only 5 million clones. We don't know what the Kaminoan prime minister meant when he said "200K units are ready and a million more are on their way." Maybe it means 1 clone (Filoni and you might share this take), maybe it means 10 clones, or 100 clones. I think it means 100 clones. Why? Because my impression of the Clone Wars was a huge, bloody, messy struggle that shook the foundations of the galactic order, and by the end the common Loyalist citizen was on their knees thanking Sheev for bringing about peace via the Empire. He wanted monsters like Dooku and Grievous scaring people on his side into sacrificing liberty for security, one bill, amendment, and executive order at a time (so that the core institutions and instruments of the Empire *already existed* by the eve of Order 66, justified by the ongoing existential war, something Filoni and the Rat's writers have failed to notice time and again) and he wanted the aliens on the other side alienated (heh) from galactic society so he could have his humanocentric Empire without those nasty xenos fouling everything up. That's the angle I've gone with in ASD. If you subscribe to a different angle, that's fine. But this is the interpretation I've built my story on and that can't change.

Fourthly, the lack of visibility of what life is like for the ordinary people who ought to be affected by a war this large. I'm mostly with you again on this one, but I only have so much time and so much willingness to drag this story out. Sure, we could look at how Joe Plumber of Planet Ohio reacts to having to stand in line for rationed foodstuffs because 75% of the planetary GDP is going to the crab droid factories subcontracted by the Techno Union, but… that by itself is not in the scope of the story I'm trying to tell. We've had brief glimpses into the hardships normal people endure at Shumavar, Caramm, and Agamar, in contrast to rich and peaceful planets like Coruscant, Raxus, and Zeltros. We will see more of how the war affects or doesn't affect common people in the future (including next chapter, planned long before I saw this review), but it will be through the eyes of the main cast when they get to those locations, and will further the character arcs I am writing. The point is, I'd love to show all these things you want to see, but I don't want to be writing Star Wars fanfiction for *another* six years. I want to move on to things I can call entirely my own, and I can only do that in good conscience when I finish this.

To Valued Reviewer 0neSwordGuy. Thank you for your lengthy review, I like seeing people's thoughts on the work I've made and letting me know what works and what doesn't work for them. I will primarily focus on your critical remarks, because some of them echo my own personal sentiments. To the contextless, his review can also be found on chapter 51.

Grievous's diminishing presence in the last dozen chapters or so is something I've been keenly aware of. I can't say too much because of spoilers but during quiet periods of the war GG's role as supreme leader doesn't have much of interest going on. He hasn't had a chance to go out and kill Jedi nor command large-scale operations worthy of his attention. GG's already got a very good idea of what he needs to do as of chapter 41 so that's not something I can spend time on either. I promise though that his role is growing to wax again before this story ends. It's everyone else who needs to catch up to him. On

that note, there will be more droid stuff in the future too.

I'm sorry you don't fully enjoy the OCs. They are deliberately written with flaws, sometimes very deep flaws (as helpful Mr. Aclinde has spelled out for us). But these are actual flaws, not just annoying piece of garbage like a sidekick in a low-budget children's cartoon. I sincerely hope your annoyance comes from the lack of GG and not the characters themselves! If it's the latter then I'm not doing my job as the writer correctly. Please let me know if I'm doing things sub-optimally (this goes for all of you reading this).

To quote George Lucas, I may have gone too far in a few places with the number OCs. But I really don't like the Star Trek problem of the bridge crew doing everything themselves. I'd rather have too many than too few, especially on something as big and complex as a warship. Furthermore, Esera needed more interactions with people who weren't killer cyborgs. Like I said in the other response, there's a human story I'm telling here. There's a reason that it took 3 years to get from chapter 1 to chapter 16, and only another 3 to get from chapter 16 to chapter 52. I've realized I'm not the kind of writer who can tell the story of a world and things happening in it, I need living characters to push me along. For better or for worse, this is what you guys have been getting and will get until the end.

I don't have much to say about Ahsoka that I haven't said in past notes. Despite general controversy regarding her past appearances, I hope all readers can see by now I'm intending to do right by her. Whether or not I succeed is up to your interpretations. But I do intend to succeed.

Finally, the real science/math stuff definitely isn't for most people. But I am primarily writing this story for my own enjoyment and I like bringing real science into Star Wars. I personally think the interaction of space magic and real world science adds to the setting, not takes away from it (and it's one of the reasons A New Hope is my favorite Star Wars movie). In fact, this interaction plays a major role in this story...

Well, I've talked long enough now, I've added well over 1500 words to this chapter's word count. Thank you again for the critiques, especially for alerting me to potential characterization issues. And shout-out to Corshy1 for beta reading, as usual. See you guys later this month, hopefully!

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